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Chapter 15: Spaces of Yoga: Towards a Non-Essentialist Understanding of Yoga^{*}

What yoga is can only become clear within a specific context.
(Maya Burger)¹

1. Introduction

This chapter will examine some of the spaces that yoga occupies in the contemporary world, both physical and social. By looking at yoga through the focus of particular, contested spaces and locations, it will be argued that overarching essentialist definitions of yoga are impossible, although individuals and social groups can and do create essentialist definitions that are more or less useful for particular purposes. By exploring these narratives and boundaries in the context of specific locations, we can better understand what people are doing with the collection of beliefs and practices known as yoga.²

Since the 1990s, in much of the developed and cosmopolitan areas of the world, there has been an obvious proliferation of purpose-built yoga centres, with

^{*} Some of the research for this chapter was carried out as part of the AYURYOG Project (<http://www.ayuryog.org/>). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 639363-AYURYOG). I would like to extend my gratitude to Karl Baier, Philipp A. Maas and Karin C. Preisendanz, as well as to Alexandra Böckle who organised the conference "Yoga in Transformation: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on a Global Phenomenon" (Vienna, 19–21 September 2013) and for providing the inputs and support without which this paper would not have been written. I also thank the comments of all the conference attendees who helped me think about these ideas further, especially, but by no means exclusively, the constructive criticism and encouragement on the themes of this paper from Joseph Alter, Karl Baier, Maya Burger, Anne Koch, Elizabeth De Michelis, David Gordon White, Dagmar Wujastyk and Dominik Wujastyk. I would particularly like to thank Cathryn Keller and Kim Knott for sharing their interests and enthusiasm.

¹ This was an astute comment Maya Burger made in contextualizing her presentation "Sāṃkhya Interpretation in a Transnational Perspective: Śrī Anirvāṇa and Lizelle Reymond" on 20 September 2013 at the conference "Yoga in Transformation" mentioned in n. *. Cf. also her contribution to its proceedings in the present volume.

² Andrea Jain (2012) and Andrew Nicholson (2013) have also explored similar themes based on historical analysis of yoga traditions.

a preference for white walls, wooden floors and high ceilings. But people also describe “doing yoga” in ashrams, gyms, at Hindutva camps, Indian temples (mandirs), inside ritually prepared fires, in schools, in homes, on surfboards, in prison cells and hospital beds. In fact, someone has probably done something he or she might describe as yoga, just about everywhere.

And, there is also likely to be someone willing to say that whatever is described as yoga is *not* yoga – or at least not “true yoga”. The removal, or glossing over, of the historical Indian religious and philosophical context to yoga is seen as perverting the essence of yoga by many Hindu activist groups.³ The perceived commercialisation, commoditisation and sexualisation of yoga are considered objectionable by many – secular practitioners and Hindu activist groups alike.⁴ Some Christian groups and Muslim clerics have argued that yoga practices are potentially undermining to their faith (a view shared by some Hindus).⁵ Followers of one particular guru might reject the insights of followers of another guru, although the contradictory insights are sometimes achieved by using very similar practices.

The general absence of specific religious imagery reflects the multicultural, cosmopolitan areas where yoga studios proliferate, with vaguely Buddhist or “Om” symbols being more likely than any references to specific Hindu deities. Except in the case of yoga spaces in more sectarian *sampradāya*-s (teaching lineages), any such symbols are likely to be underplayed and presented as “optional” in the contemporary context. The minimalistic aesthetics popular in many practice and teaching spaces, may suggest an openness to creativity, to personal transformation, to interpretation and re-interpretation.

But as already implied, the modern, non-religious nature of the contemporary yoga space is not without controversy. This overtly “empty” room in which yoga is taught and practised is seen as disingenuously neutral by many religious groups, particularly more conservative forms of Christianity and Islam. The lack of imagery is believed to be a trick, where Hindu or at least “un-Christian”

3 For examples see Occupy Yoga (2014) which is re-printed on the National Council of Hindu Temples (UK) website (2014) and the Hindu American Foundation’s (HAF) Take Back Yoga campaign which began in 2010 (HAF 2014a, 2014b and Vitello 2010).

4 For a case study of these types of re-occurring controversy, the concept of commercial copyright and yoga was discussed in depth by Allison Fish (2006) in the context of Bikram Yoga, which has since been associated with cases of sexual impropriety (Vanity Fair 2013 and Forshee 2016). An overview of many areas of controversy and yoga is also provided by Gwilym Beckerlegge (2013). Also see Jain’s analysis (2012).

5 For examples see Tedjasukmana 2009 on yoga in Indonesia and Fleetwood 2012 for the distinctions the Catholic Church has made between different kinds of “Eastern Meditation” including yoga, and Catholic orthodoxy; Mohler 2010 for a Southern Baptist position and Shukla 2010 for a Hindu “yoga purist” position. However, a more nuanced Hindu American Foundation position on yoga in schools is that “*āsana*-s” are okay but “yoga as a whole” is not (2014c). Jain (2014a) has also analysed the oppositional dialectics of two of these positions.



Figure 1: A typical contemporary “yoga studio” space in 2014 (photograph of triyoga Chelsea in London, used with the permission of triyoga).

indoctrination lies subtly beneath the surface of activities conducted therein. Simultaneously, some Hindutva groups see the absence of religious signifiers as a dilution and corruption of their sacred traditions.⁶ In this way, physical space becomes an exceptionally useful focus for understanding controversy, contested meanings and the complex and multivalent place of yoga in contemporary society.

Before returning to the aesthetics found in contemporary yoga centres, it would be helpful to examine a few other locations where yoga has been controversial. Looking at the origins of the controversy in a particular case can help us discover the boundaries and contested concepts embroiled in the term yoga. If one starts to look at specific places of yoga practice, one quickly becomes enmeshed in narratives of what yoga is and is not in the eyes of both practitioners and other interested commentators.

⁶ See Jain 2012.

2. The Stage and Yoga Performance

Most understandings of yoga assume that the practice must be taught or transmitted in some way from an adept, guru or teacher, to the neophyte or student (*śiṣya*). This is often imagined as a private exchange between two individuals and not a public experience. But in the modern period yoga has become associated with more performative, public demonstrations. Yoga as performance has a long history; during the colonial period feats of physical daring and contortion were reported in street performances.⁷ This association gave yoga practices a particularly unsavoury connotation – being associated with low-life cheats, street performers and beggars. This performative aspect of yoga also is associated with the scientific demonstrations of Swami Kuvalayananda, the Mysore palace demonstrations by Krishnamacharya and his students and the promotion of yoga as an “Olympic” event by Bikram Choudhury.⁸ In some of these contexts, there is also a stage, a space where experts or virtuosos are raised above, or at least separated from, an audience of spectators. This can be a particularly controversial as some find the stage offensive; its use is seen as exhibitionist and antithetical to a more introverted essence of yoga, often assumed to be historically, or more authentically, a personal transmission from a single teacher (*guru*) to an individual student (*śiṣya*).

When B. K. S. Iyengar (1918–2014) came to Britain to promote yoga in the 1960s, he attempted to make use of every platform he could in order to inspire interest in the subject. His stages included the living rooms of the elite in Highgate, the Everyman’s Theatre in Hampstead, the stage offered by BBC television broadcasting, the large stage of London’s Quaker Meeting Hall in Euston, and a sell-out demonstration at the Barbican in London (a major classical music venue) in 1984. Some during this period took offense at Iyengar’s performance of physical virtuosity, which they considered to be violent, exhibitionist, and exemplifying contortionism rather than yoga.⁹ However, Iyengar’s performances did inspire considerable interest in the subject of yoga and his promotion contributed to making physical-posture oriented yoga a more normal activity in the West.

Even after the initial goal of popularizing yoga had been achieved, Iyengar continued to make pedagogical and practical uses of the stage as a teaching tool. Stages were sometimes built into the multi-purpose schoolrooms, theatres, and meeting rooms that were used to teach yoga. The majority of spaces in which the

7 White 2009 and Singleton 2010: 35–54.

8 For early twenty century examples of performative yoga see Alter 2004 and 2008, Singleton 2010 and Sarbacker 2014; for Bikram Yoga see Hauser 2013, Fish 2006 and Vanity Fair 2013.

9 Newcombe 2008: 99 and Thompson 2004.

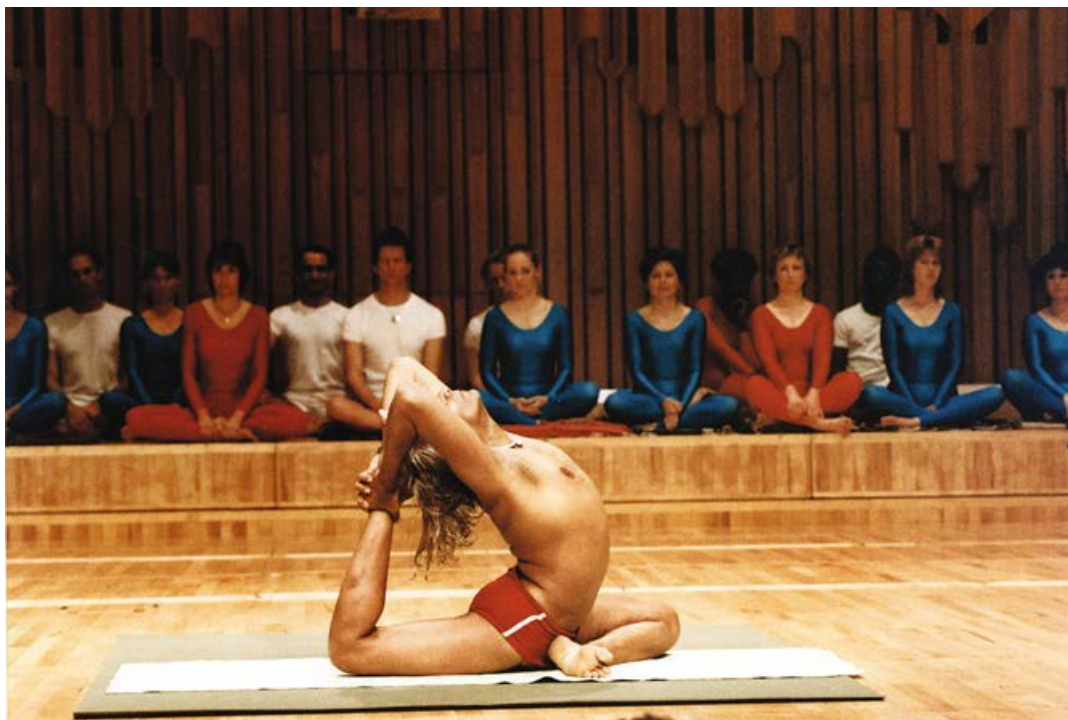


Figure 2: B. K. S. Iyengar on stage at the Barbican Theatre in Central London in 1984 (photograph courtesy of the Iyengar Yoga Institute Maida Vale in London).

Iyengar method of yoga is taught do not contain a stage-like structure. However, a stage area does feature at the Iyengar “home institute” in Pune (Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute or RIMYI). The yoga studio here is a purpose-built room which also features eight columns to symbolise Patañjali’s *aṣṭāṅga* (eight limbed) description of yoga. In addition to serving as a traditional stage for events and celebrations, during the course of a normal class, RIMYI teachers and their students may stand on the stage to demonstrate “correct” actions, extensions and alignment to be visible to the entire class. In the pedagogical model of the Iyengar method of yoga, the correct actions, extensions and alignments must be felt proprioceptively, but also teachers must be able to see if their students are embodying subtle physical actions. The performance of particular *āsana*-s by students forms part of the pedagogic framework to enable a multi-faceted understanding of *āsana*. The stage is also used in Iyengar classes as a piece of equipment to assist and enhance the actions of particular postures: to drop back to, or lean over with in backbends, to hang over in an inversion, or perhaps as a ledge for leg raises. From the early 1970s Iyengar was well known for emphasizing how household objects and walls, as well as gymnasium equipment could be used as an aid towards improving yoga *āsana*-s.¹⁰

10 There are a series of articles about Iyengar teaching with “found” props such as walls, in *Yoga & Health* (1971–1975).



Figure 3: Diana Clifton using the stage at RIMYI in Pune as a “prop” for self-practice in 1977 (photograph courtesy of the Iyengar Yoga Association [UK] Archives Committee).

Lefebvre’s analysis of the production of space emphasises the social construction and re-construction of spaces (1991). This can be seen to be recapitulated in the above uses of the stage – the architects, builders and engineers designed the structure to function for certain expected uses (for people to stand and perform upon), but the structure is re-used for different purposes (e.g., as a yoga prop), and the same space is imagined to hold different meanings by different people (an area for clarity in demonstration, the popularisation of a sacred art or an exhibition of contortionism). What the stage *is* can only be understood in context of what it is doing. While a “functional” stage necessitates a separation between performers and audience, this difference can serve a variety of purposes (e.g., art performance, teaching, exhibitionism, attracting attention for a political campaign etc.) and of course it is experienced and evaluated in many different ways by the individuals involved. Meanwhile, the physical object of the stage in Iyengar classes is also reinvented as a ledge for sitting, a “prop” for backdrops or backbends, or its edge can form a wall for the foot to push against. Here the physical object itself is conceptualised as a tool for teaching and assisting in the development of inner proprioceptive awareness.

The diversity of uses for the stage in Iyengar’s presentation of yoga is illustrative of a contentious area – is yoga primarily internal or external? Is it for public presentation or a matter of sacred, inner contemplation and experience?

3. Yoga in Schools: Encinitas School District Yoga

Another place where yoga is periodically controversial is when it appears in children's educational establishments.¹¹ Schools are a particularly emotionally charged physical and social space, where a community sends its children to learn the skills and values considered most essential to successful participation in that particular society. As in other locations, central to the debate on what yoga is are concerns where to draw the lines between public and private; sacred and profane; religious and secular. A particularly salient example of how exploring yoga in a particular physical space can illuminate the multiplicity of social and conceptual placements of yoga is encapsulated in the lawsuit brought against the teaching of yoga in California's Encinitas School District during 2013.

In 2011, the Encinitas School District accepted a grant from an organisation called the Jois Foundation to teach a version of its yoga programme to school children.¹² The Jois Foundation was established in 2011 largely on the initiative of Sonia Tutor Jones, a practitioner of the yoga taught by Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009), described as Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga or often just “Ashtanga” yoga. Sonia Tutor Jones is also the wife of billionaire hedge-fund investor Paul Tutor Jones II of Tudor Investment Corp. The beliefs and practices of Jois' very physical, flowing yoga practice-lineage have received a fair amount of academic attention since becoming an influential “style” of yoga outside India since the 1970s, becoming particularly popular from the 1990s onwards.¹³ This was an interesting place from which to launch a large yoga-in-schools initiative as the Jois lineage is not the most secular of contemporary Modern Postural Yoga schools¹⁴ with many senior practitioners emphasising that strict adherence to the series of postures, done correctly over many years, will solve both physical ailments and lead to liberation. However, the Jois Foundation took a more flexible approach to its initiative to promote yoga in schools with aims to promote a “holistic” and “mind-body” approach to students' health and wellbeing. The Tutor Jones' have also given large donations to the Contemplative Sciences Centre at the University of Virginia who are seeking to empirically examine the effectiveness of various “contemplative” activities that are widely believed to promote health and well-

11 In general the role of yoga and educational institutions has been under-researched from social scientific and social historical perspectives. But for the development of Iyengar yoga in the British Adult Education framework see Newcombe 2007, 2008, and 2014, and for comments on yoga in German schools Augenstein 2013.

12 The first classes were piloted in Capri Elementary School in Encinitas, California in 2011 and expanded into more elementary schools in 2012. The original grant was for US\$ 533,720 over three years to cover teaching for up to 5,600 students in the Encinitas Union School District (Spagat 2013).

13 Burger 2006; Byrne 2014; Nichter 2013; Nevrein 2008; Smith 2004, 2007, 2008.

14 De Michelis 2004: 187–189.

ness. In fact, the Taylor Jones' philanthropic agenda is broader than simply an alliance to the lineage of Pattabhi Jois' teaching, which was reflected in a change of name from the Jois Foundation to the Sonima Foundation in 2013.

The yoga programme offered in the Encinitas School District was introduced as a "life skills curriculum" that included discussions of ethics, nutrition, general wellness and character development. The school district and supportive parents emphasised the promotion of health and well-being as the goal of the programme and denied it having a religious nature. The Foundation argued that through two thirty-minute yoga sessions a week and some "character training" sessions based on the ethical principles of the *yama* and *niyama*, there might be widespread benefits for students. Everything from reductions in diabetic symptoms, behaviour problems in class, a decline in obesity, and higher standardised test scores were suggested as potential benefits. In addition to offering the money for the classes, the Jois Foundation intended to test specific health and wellness claims with University of San Diego-led research on the efficacy of the programme in meeting these goals (CEPAL 2014).

However, even before the pilot class was launched in the Capri Elementary School, parents of some students were objecting to the very idea that yoga could be taught to their children. The "Sedlock parents" represented a group of objecting parents supported pro-bono by The National Centre for Law and Policy (NCLP), an non-profit legal group supporting "the protection and promotion of religious freedom, the sanctity of life, traditional marriage, parental rights, and other civil liberties" which is closely associated with ideological positions of contemporary neo-conservative politics and conservative Christian faith (NCLP 2014). They argued that the Jois Foundation was deeply committed to "Ashtanga Yoga" which, the plaintiffs asserted, has its roots in Hinduism and therefore was inseparable from Hinduism.¹⁵ The religious studies scholar Candy Gunther Brown argued for the plaintiffs; in her expert witness statement she testified that in Hinduism, bodily movement and ritual carry an essence of religiosity independent of beliefs. She held that any *āsana* – for example, the sun salutation – is infused with the essence of "Hindu" religiosity (Brown 2013a).¹⁶ Here, Brown is offering an example of an essentialist understanding of yoga, based on her own ideological and political positioning.

In response to Brown's essentialist proposal, it is important to also consider the significance of the internal meaning to the actor. For example, walking into a church and sitting still is not necessarily a religious act – one can enter from any

¹⁵ DiBono 2013; Broyles 2013.

¹⁶ Her testimony can also be seen as publicity for her book (Brown 2013b) that discusses how the healing involved with a variety of alternative and complementary medicine practices entails beliefs and worldviews that might have complex and contested relationships with other belief systems – particularly Christianity.

number of internal positions – as a sceptic, as a sociologist, as a sympathetic friend, or for private prayer and contemplation. An internal position may shift unexpectedly – but it is equally inappropriate to assume a religious or a secular meaning to any physical movement made by an individual as far as the internal experience of the individual is concerned. It may also be relevant to consider the internal position of the “teacher” as significant for those who wish to participate or critique the practice – something that may or may not be obvious in the way the material is presented.¹⁷ The significance of this point will be discussed further in the next section of the chapter.

The presiding judge made his judgment on the case of *Sedlock vs. Baird* on 1 July 2013; this was not a jury trial. Judge Meyer agreed with the plaintiff’s expert witness, Candy Gunther Brown, that yoga (in principle) was religious. However Judge Meyer applied a legal precedent, called the Lemon Test (*Lemon v. Kurtzman* 1971), to argue that the programme (1) was not undertaken with the intention of propagating religion, (2) that there wasn’t strong evidence that a view of “pro-Eastern religion” or “anti-Western religion” was taught and that (3) the school district has complete control over the curriculum and teachers. It was considered particularly significant that the intention was neither to propagate nor denigrate any religious beliefs and that the school district, not the funding body, had ultimate control over the curriculum taught.¹⁸ Therefore Judge Meyer found that the classes did not represent a challenge to the US legal requirement that there be a separation between church and state.¹⁹ This provides an (arguably) clear legal position relative to the concepts of religious and secular of what Judge Meyer termed “EUSD yoga – that is – Encinitas United School District yoga”.²⁰

Judge Meyer’s conclusion highlighted that the objecting parents had defined yoga through their Christian beliefs and what they had read about yoga on the Internet – the Judge specifically called the plaintiffs’ complaints “Trial by Wikipedia” and believed that the legal fiction of an “objective child” would not “perceive religion in EUSD yoga”.²¹ Judge Meyer implied that the plaintiffs’ po-

17 This point was also made by a journalist in relation to the Encinitas Yoga trial (Thompson 2013).

18 The issue of control of curriculum was seen as an essential difference from *Malick vs. Yogi* (1978) which ruled that teaching yoga in form of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s Science of Creative Intelligence in the New Jersey public school system was a violation of the First Amendment; here the curriculum in question was neither open to public scrutiny nor modification by the school district.

19 Meyer 2013: 13–16.

20 Although the expert witness Brown disagrees; she wrote an article in the *Huffington Post* in response to the verdict (Brown 2013c). The 2015 appeal decision more unambiguously stated that, “After reviewing the evidence, the court of appeal agreed that a reasonable observer would view the content of the district’s yoga program as being entirely secular” (Aaron 2015).

21 Meyer 2013: 19.

sition was ideologically and not experientially based; their objections to yoga were based in their own ideas of what yoga is or is not. In Encinitas you can clearly see the same curriculum – which all sides agree to call “yoga” – being defined in an essentialist way as “religious” by the plaintiffs and non-religious by the defendants. In contrast, the judge took what I am going to call a situationalist definition, considering a unique case by specific criteria.

The result of this trial is revealing of the complex and contested positioning that yoga holds in contemporary society. The same curriculum, called “yoga” by both the plaintiffs and defendants in this case, was held to be radically different in nature by each group. For the plaintiffs, yoga is essentially religious and for the defendants yoga (at least in this case) is a secular way to promote health and well-being. So how can we understand what yoga is conceptually?

In order to understand the situational, and contested definitions exemplified by *Sedlock v. Baird*, I will borrow from Kim Knott’s spatial theories, in particular Knott’s diagram of “The Religious/Secular Field and its Force Relationships” which helps envision a more metaphorical spatial relationship between the religious, the secular, and the post-secular.²²

4. Mappings of Space: Maps and the Spatial Theory

As one looks at particular local articulations of religious or spiritual meaning, the more these concrete (physical locations) and abstract realms (ideological positions) become interconnected. In his far-reaching Marxist spatial analysis Lefebvre declares that “its [space’s] effects may be observed on all planes and in all the interconnections between them [...]” and that the effect and importance of space cannot be restricted to any single methodology or academic discipline.²³ Drawing on Lefebvre, Kim Knott has been interested in understanding religion through what she calls a “spatial analysis”. Her analysis began at looking where religion is located both in geographical locations and built-environment places, but quickly realised the importance of considering “cultural spaces” and “ideological positions”. As many commentators on architecture and space have pointed out, while in some respects human activity is constrained by the immediate physical environment, humans constantly recreate, and subvert apparent restrictions. For example, a building’s usages change and adapt from the original building plans; spaces are re-designed to suit new social uses.

Kim Knott has used her model of spatial analysis to illustrate the contested areas of religious, secular and “post-secular” understandings in contemporary

²² Lefebvre 1991 and Knott 2005: 125.

²³ Lefebvre 1991: 412.

societies. To better conceptualise and “map” the dialectical relationships between sacred and secular, Knott has created a triangular diagram reconstructed below:

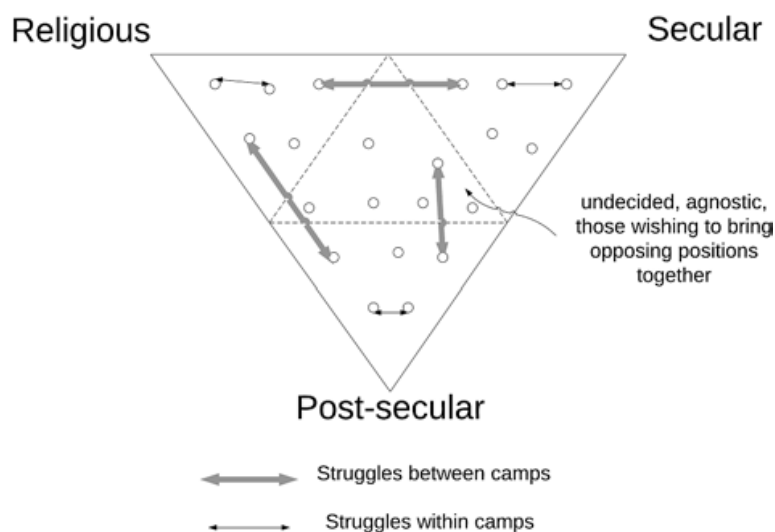


Figure 4: From Kim Knott’s “The Religious/Secular Field, and its Force Relationships” (2005: 125). Reprinted with permission from Kim Knott.

The small dots represent individuals or institutional actors. Everyone in every place could potentially be mapped onto this grid, holding some kind of position in relation to the religious. Knott holds that within this field “four areas or camps can be seen: religious, secular, post-secular and the middle-ground – which includes the undecided, the deliberately agnostic, and those who desire to build bridges.”²⁴ The downward point of Knott’s triangle is labelled “post-secular”. This is a way of addressing the activities, popular in the “late-modern West”, that are neither the traditionally religious, nor clearly secular and might include things classified as new age, spiritual, holistic or other ways of “returning” to the sacred influenced by post-modern understandings of the world. While this idea of “post-Secular” might be a useful way of characterizing one “polarity” of the religious vs. secular dialectic in contemporary Western society more generally, James Beckford had skilfully demonstrated how it is also a problematic concept.²⁵

While Lefebvre was primarily concerned with how the space of neo-liberal, capitalistic society was produced, Knott has applied the idea of spatial analysis to the subject of specifically religious and spiritual locations and practices. Knott suggests this diagram describes a field where power and knowledge is expressed and contested, in which “deeply held views and values [...] mark out the territorial areas and lines of engagement within it”. These controversies “occur in

²⁴ Knott 2005: 125.

²⁵ Knott 2005: 71–77 and Beckford 2012.

space and, as such, the places they occupy are amenable to spatial analysis”.²⁶ Knott holds that there is no position outside these relationships; all actors and commentators are somehow positioned in this “field” that is dialectical and not merely oppositional. That is to say, although some positions, or actors, in yoga may present themselves as antagonistic to other actors, closer analysis can show that both positions are created through relationship with the other, and many positions also depend on relationships which are much less antagonistic. All the various actors and understandings are positioned in dialogue with other possible positions and the complexity of the relationship between positions must be considered for a more comprehensive synthesis of meaning to emerge.

Thinking more closely about the physical and metaphorical spaces that yoga occupies in the contemporary world, I have adjusted Knott’s diagram:

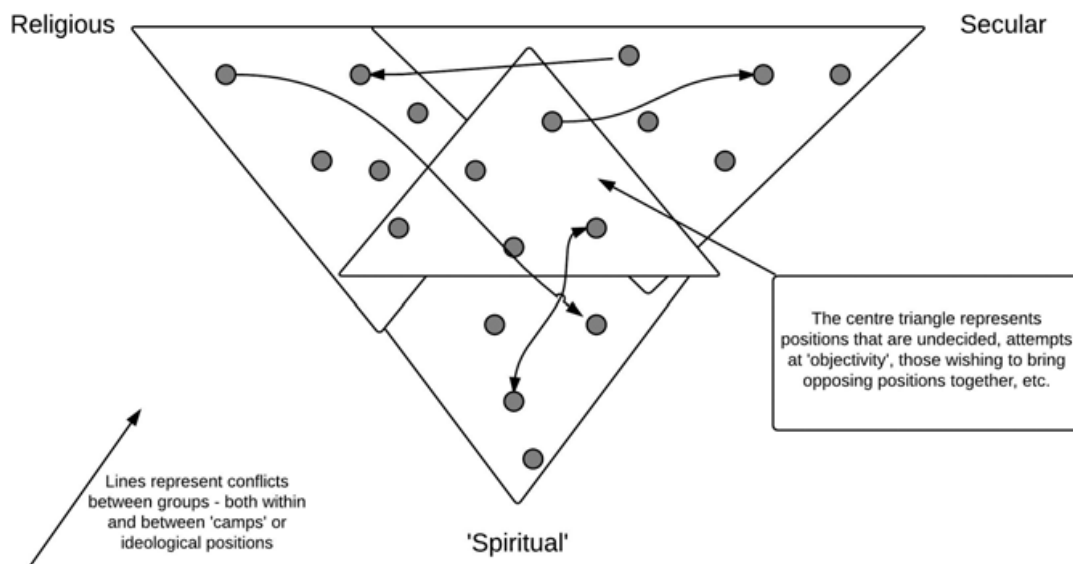


Figure 5: Yoga Religious/Secular Field and its Force Relationships.

This spatial analysis of yoga creates a less tidy “map” than Knott’s template. The Yoga Sacred vs. Secular Field contains the dialectics of Knott’s triangle. The “post-secular” pole at the bottom has been replaced with “spiritual” as many yoga teachers report their practice to be “spiritual but not religious” or variations on that idea.²⁷ The significant central triangle area in this map incorporates some academic positions, but at times, academic positions are coloured by underlying assumptions and ideological positions on one of the “poles” or points of the triangle. Additionally yoga practitioners, whose personal practice has a definite placement on the triangle, might also adopt more “objective”, “neutral” and

²⁶ Knott 2005: 125.

²⁷ This was a theme in my oral history interviews of yoga practitioners in Britain (Newcombe 2008: 197–226).

bridge-building perspectives as they interact with others or attempt to understand more objectively the history and diversity of what is called “yoga”. This overlap necessitates the incorporation of Venn-diagram style overlaps of the internal triangles. Although this is certainly not the only way to conceptualise yoga, every local expression, personal practice, or ideological placement of what yoga “is” could be understood as having a place somewhere in the largest triangular field. Any one position is determined, in part, through a dialogue and interaction with other positions on the diagram.

Thinking about the Encinitas yoga trail, this diagram helps one understand how each opposing side placed the same EUSD yoga curriculum definitively in different places in this diagram. Each side had a deeply held belief about what yoga is, but in practice, the yoga curriculum was modified due to parental objections and the lived experience changed because of the public debate and lawsuit. Looking at this case as a whole, yoga cannot be seen as a fixed thing – depending on where you stand, like in a hall of mirrors, what people are *doing* as yoga can be viewed as resting in quite a few different places in the map. This spatial mapping of yoga is messy, imprecise, and subject to debate. However, by introducing this Religious vs. Secular mapping to yoga (and the idea of special analysis more generally), a conceptual framework begins to emerge where the complex positioning of individuals and traditions in the contemporary world can be visualised, discussed and acknowledged.²⁸

We will now turn our attention to another contested location for yoga in contemporary society.

5. Private Space and the Imagined Yoga Tradition

Many individuals who have been involved with teaching or practising yoga for decades have a particular understanding and definition of “authentic yoga” based on their own involvement with the subject. Sometimes this sentiment finds expression in contrast with what is considered “not yogic” or at least “not *real* yoga”. Most of these practitioners have had profound and transforming personal experiences that they have experienced by practising something called yoga.²⁹

²⁸ As much as I would like to have a “bird’s eye view”, as Knott (2005) emphasises, in arguing this position I am attempting to position myself in the central triangle of this spatial diagram – that of someone who wishes to build bridges and bring antagonistic positions towards a more common understanding. From this central position, I attempt to accurately observe and understand all other positions within the descriptions of “yoga” as accurately as possible.

²⁹ Since 2002, I have formally interviewed over thirty people who were involved in forming the practice of yoga in Britain from the 1960s to the 1990s and dozens more who are involved in a contemporary yoga practice.

There are two aspects of this – the first is that often when people speak of what yoga is or is not, they have some idea of what yoga should be. This idea in their head is an ideal from which they judge their practice – and how they judge the practice of others. Wilfred Clark, founder of the British Wheel of Yoga, talked a lot in the early journals about “True Yoga” with a capital “T” – that could not be divorced from the study of philosophy. True Yoga for Wilfred Clark and many others equates to “union with God”.³⁰ This mental positioning of a “True vs. False” yoga, can also be understood as a continuation of the narrative of yogis coming out of colonial India – which populated popular imagination of “yogis” with deceitful fakirs, dangerous magicians as well as ideas of respectable teachers and highly realised ascetics with super-natural abilities.³¹

In my research I found a tendency for people in the yoga world to say, agreeably, “it’s all yoga” except when they find something they disagree with – which is then categorised as not being “TRUE yoga”. This conceptual framework of “True vs. False” yoga contains many similarities across traditions – “true” yoga is usually something “more than physical” and makes reference to Patañjali’s *Yogasūtra*, *samādhi*, and/or an idea of “union with the divine”. Usually objections have to do with accusations of commodification, sexualisation, westernisation, or secularisation of the practices.³² But there are also passionate differences on both goals and techniques, what are appropriate *kriya* (cleansing) practices, how much emphasis there should be on the “more than physical” aspects of the practice, if postures (*āsana*-s) and/or breathing techniques (*prāṇāyāma*-s) should be practised before a firm grounding in the ethical framework (*yama* and *niyama*) is established. Each and every one of these practices has been described by someone as “True Yoga” or “real yoga” – in contrast to an imagined “fraudulent yoga”.

Every individual’s “True Yoga” differs in shade and colour to the next person’s; some are populated by deities, others by emptiness, yet others by the primacy of health and wellness as goals. Some of these places are reached by intense physical practice, others by mystical visions within quiet contemplation or relaxation. Although it could be also argued there is great conformity in assumptions about yoga’s aims and means, practitioners can become passionate about seemingly minor differences in doctrine or practice. While in some contexts, this differentiation could be read as a marketing technique,³³ practitioners are also often making deeply felt theological and practical distinctions. This

30 Newcombe 2008: 72 and 198–206.

31 White 2009 and Singleton 2010: 35–54.

32 Matthew Remski (2014) is in the process of doing interesting work on the experience and rationalisation of injury by contemporary yoga practitioners.

33 Jain 2014b.

imagined positioning of “True Yoga” is important to take note of – and to take seriously.

Yet, if we want to present ourselves as aiming for an objective understanding – positioning ourselves in the centre of this spatial triangle metaphor – it is important that we remember the “No-True-Scotsman Move” or logical fallacy. This error of argument was well described by the British philosopher Anthony Flew, who explained “the essence of the move consists in sliding between two radically different interpretations of the same or very similar forms of words.”³⁴ A short way of explaining this fallacy is as follows:

Person One: Every Scotsman loves whiskey.

Person Two: But my friend is Scottish and he hates whiskey.

Person One: Oh, but every TRUE Scotsman loves whiskey.

In contemporary yoga milieus there is both a superficial tolerance for a diversity of traditions and practices as well as a logical move to set apart and define a specific practice as more “yogic” than the alternatives.

In some respects, the experiential referent of the word “yoga” is unique for every individual. Used in this way the word yoga could be seen as an example of Wittgenstein “private language”.³⁵ Yoga is a symbol that refers to real experiences – but experiences that are essentially untranslatable. There are clear patterns and resemblances to do with the way the word “yoga” is used; we know the sort of thing people are talking about. Again following Wittgenstein, the word yoga can be understood as a kaleidoscopic pattern of family resemblances^{36, 37} Practitioners derive their understanding of “True Yoga” from a particular tradition and personal experiences. Teachers and students of a particular yoga will understand and present that tradition somewhat differently from the guru and other practitioners of that school. It is a mistake therefore to use private experience and personal understanding as a basis of an essentialist definition of what Yoga “truly is”.

However, “True Yoga” is a sacred place – in the Durkheimian sense of the word – a place set apart and forbidden.³⁸ In what way forbidden? In my experience, it is

34 Flew 1975: 48.

35 Wittgenstein 2001, §§ 243–271.

36 Wittgenstein 2001, §§ 65–71.

37 Although central to Wittgenstein’s philosophy, the basic idea of family resemblances also pre-dates Wittgenstein and has been found in the work of John Stuart Mills, Friedrich Nietzsche, Lev Vygotsky and Władysław Tatarkiewicz, amongst others. Another way of understanding might be offered by Hilary Lawson’s concept of “linguistic closure”, which, Lawson (2001) argues, is what we do to make sense of a world that is open. When we present one definitional understanding of yoga, it either incorporates or excludes other possibilities – it is a decision to make a task, or understanding more manageable.

38 Durkheim (1995: 44): “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden.”

an imagined understanding often approached with metaphors and stories, but consisting of insights that are hard to verbalise and share with others. Perhaps here is the heart of many religious experiences. As such, the place of “True Yoga” needs to be treated with both respect and curiosity. This is a description of a place of deep meaning and transformation for those who articulate it. The idea of “True Yoga” for the practitioner is an attempt to identify and protect an experience of holiness and meaning, that may have deep significance for their lives and worldview.



Figure 6: B. K. S. Iyengar teaching in the first Iyengar Yoga Institute in Maida Vale in 1983, a former artists' studio. Note the use of the existing pillar for pedagogical purposes (photograph: Silvia Prescott, courtesy of the Iyengar Yoga Institute Maida Vale, London).

The ubiquitous “yoga mat” which appeared sometime in the 1980s has become associated with a portable sacred space. A number of these mats are seen clearly in Figure 1, they are slightly sticky to avoid sliding while holding various postures. They separate out the “personal space” of each individual in the room and give a sense of privacy to the internal experience of the person on the mat. Elizabeth De Michelis has described the ritual elements of contemporary globalised yoga as a

“healing ritual of secular religion”.³⁹ The yoga mat has become a ritual space where physical and psychological re-orientations (often experienced as “healing”) are enacted. Although often performed in public, the limits of a personal mat are often experienced as a deeply personal location. There is a sacredness of this experience, that many practitioners feel must be guarded from prying eyes and disrespectful thoughts in order for the practitioner’s journey to continue. All the tension and acrimonious allusions between yoga practitioners of “this is not yogic”, “yoga teachers should not sell their skills for profit – that’s not True Yoga”, “True Yoga is never [...]” could be seen as individuals protecting their sacred space.

6. The Studio Space

As touched upon in the introduction, there are a wide variety of ways of physically accommodating a space for yoga within the home – from a dedicated practice room with religious iconography, to an empty corner with space for a yoga mat, to no obvious space at all for the practice, which is somehow fitted around oversized furniture and television screens. Lefebvre argued that every society produces its own unique arrangement of space and that it would be surprising to find a real society that did not produce a distinctive space. Although yoga can be found potentially in any space, the culture of contemporary yoga practice is producing a particular kind of physical space: the yoga *studio*.

“Studio” is a particularly apt description of many of the physical spaces used for a dedicated yoga practice in the developed world. The word “studio” became popular in English in the nineteenth century to describe the work place of artists. But it is also a word with other meanings: is also used to describe the work places of filmmakers, musicians, and one-room living quarters. Many commercial yoga spaces and also martial arts centres are referred to as studios. In contemporary English-speaking countries the yoga “studio” may refer just to the entire centre or simply the room where yoga is practised. In a commercial yoga venue, there may be several such studio rooms, while the building as a whole is known by a brand name. In large commercial yoga venues there is usually an entrance space (where monetary transactions occur), toilets, and an area or room(s) for changing clothes. Larger centres also may have small shops for yoga-related books and equipment, cafes, meditation rooms, and possibly therapy rooms for other complementary treatments, e. g., massage, osteopathy, chiropractic, and/or Ayurvedic treatments. Rather than studios, these areas for therapy are typically called “treatment rooms”, perhaps underlying the active involvement of the

39 De Michelis 2004: 252–257.

practitioner in the yoga experience, in contrast to an individual being a passive recipient of the work of a therapist in the other rooms. Some studio spaces can be mapped explicitly on the religious side of the conceptual triangle, including images of deities and/or guru figures. Other studio spaces are absent of overt ideological symbols, aiming for a more secular impression. Often there is a fudging of relatively neutral symbols, like the sound Om in Sanskrit or a figure that is meditating, which leave a “post-secular” or “spiritual” impression without pointing towards any specific affiliation. The ubiquitous spacious and “blank” aesthetics found in contemporary yoga studios, described at the beginning of this chapter lend themselves to a multitude of creative interpretations.

Like the contemporary yoga studio, there is a curious bridging of dichotomies in the space conceptualised as an artist’s studio. A studio is the private space of creation and a space sometimes opened to the public for the sale of art, in order to support more creation. Here the controversy about the sale of yoga finds a close parallel. Do artists “sell out” when they produce popular, but inferior works to feed themselves? Artists often seek out light and space for their studio spaces – like the rooms of modern yoga practitioners. There is also a curious continuum between cluttered and empty workspaces where the art is produced. Yoga spaces often aim a feeling of spaciousness, while also sometimes moving towards clutter with images of deities and props to assist the transformative process. It is not without accident that some of the first dedicated yoga-teaching spaces in Europe, e.g. the space used by Selvarajan Yesudian in Geneva during the 1940s and the first dedicated Iyengar Yoga Institute in London were previously used by artists as studios.⁴⁰

The artists’ studio, like the yoga studio is a space of creation and transformation, of highly disciplined practices and of unpredictable insight and creativity. In these spaces, yoga practitioners seek to transform themselves – often in ways that they can only intuit and not necessarily articulate. Contemporary yoga practitioners work on themselves as they might on a work of art, where the process itself is often viewed as significant as anything that is actually produced. What the actual work is, what it aims to create and represent, and how others see it is as varied for the yoga practitioner as it is for the artist.

40 I would like to thank Cathryn Keller for sharing this historical information on Yesudian and her enthusiasm about studio spaces more generally.

7. Conclusions

The spaces that yoga occupies in contemporary society are many and various. This presentation only touched upon some of the many activities called yoga by different groups of people. I hope that by looking at some of the places where yoga is practised and at the meanings given to the use of those spaces, some of the narratives about what “is” and “is not” yoga will be enriched by a broader understanding. Yoga is presented in particular ways depending on the requirements of particular social or physical locations.

Although there is an ideal that yoga can be practised anywhere, at any time, some spaces cost money, others need to maintain an income in order to focus on their practice – the space of the market place puts pressure on the shape and places occupied by yoga. Likewise, the intentions and internal experiences behind any practice are hard to access. The imagined meanings and significance of the practice add another layer of complexity to understanding the placement of yoga in contemporary society.

Yoga cannot be reduced to a religious practice. It cannot be reduced to a spiritual practice, or a secular practice. It is often intensely private, but it can also be a social and political act. It has genealogies of historical continuity and spontaneous re-inventions that are glossed with narratives of tradition. Conceptualizing yoga as a lived space occupying all positions from sacred to secular – public and private – opens up a view of yoga that is non-linear and non-essentialist. If one looks at yoga from all the spatial positions it can occupy it is obvious that yoga is immensely flexible and amorphous.

In academic articles and media reports alike, there is pressure to define yoga. A standard narrative might touch on Indus valley seals, ascetic practices in the first century BCE, the codification of Patañjali’s *sūtra*-s, various Tantric and Haṭha developments, into more modern accommodations with scientific worldviews. Writing this linear introduction to what yoga is often feels unavoidable and perhaps it is necessary. But this standard piece places the researcher in an ideological position that may obfuscate other aspects of critical observation. The essentialist, linear narrative legitimates *and* delegitimises a variety of political positions of actors involved with yoga globally.

With this analysis I hope to draw attention to the positioning of academic researchers, as well as yoga practitioners into this highly contested field of definitions, narratives and politics. Historical narratives and normative discourses defining what yoga “is” and “is not” can both reveal and obfuscate ideological positioning and underlying assumptions of the speakers. Often unspoken assumptions and essentialist understandings of yoga lead to different traditions speaking at cross-purposes, unable to engage in dialogue, or actively antagonistic towards other understandings of the practice.

Complicating definitions of yoga – understanding yoga in non-essentialist, but in instrumental, situational terms – is important. These diverse practices called “yoga” can be a space for radical transformations of consciousness, the expression of religious sentiment, means for commercial profit, a way of crafting the physical body or establishing a social persona and every space in between. If we enquire more into where yoga is practised and what people are doing with their practices, rather than what yoga *is*, we might find more space for dialogue. It is only by considering yoga in precise locations that statements about yoga’s significance and effects can have any meaning.

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